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Yamazaki

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(54) **SEMICONDUCTOR DEVICE, METHOD OF CONTROLLING THE SAME, AND CAMERA BASED ON REFERENCE COMPARISON**

USPC 348/247, 301, 302, 297, 350, 362;
396/96, 128, 225
See application file for complete search history.

(71) Applicant: **CANON KABUSHIKI KAISHA**,
Tokyo (JP)

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(72) Inventor: **Tatsuhiko Yamazaki**, Zama (JP)

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(73) Assignee: **Canon Kabushiki Kaisha**, Tokyo (JP)

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Primary Examiner — Hung Lam

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(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm* — Fitzpatrick, Cella, Harper & Scinto

(30) **Foreign Application Priority Data**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

(51) **Int. Cl.**

H04N 5/232 (2006.01)

H04N 5/353 (2011.01)

H04N 5/376 (2011.01)

A semiconductor device comprises a plurality of units, each including a sensor unit which accumulates charges upon photoelectric conversion and a storage unit which stores information, and a control unit which controls each of the plurality of units, wherein the control unit sequentially performs, for each of the plurality of units, first operation of comparing a reference voltage with an output signal from the sensor unit based on the amount of accumulated charges and second operation of storing information based on the comparison result in the storage unit corresponding to the sensor unit if an output signal from the sensor unit reaches the reference voltage in the first operation, and the control unit is configured to be able to start the first operation for a next unit upon skipping the second operation and skips the second operation in a predetermined period.

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

CPC **H04N 5/3765** (2013.01); **H04N 5/23212** (2013.01); **H04N 5/353** (2013.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

CPC ... H04N 5/3559; H04N 5/2178; H04N 5/353;
H04N 5/355; H04N 5/35572; H04N 5/37457;
H04N 5/374; H04N 3/1506; H04N 5/2353

12 Claims, 14 Drawing Sheets

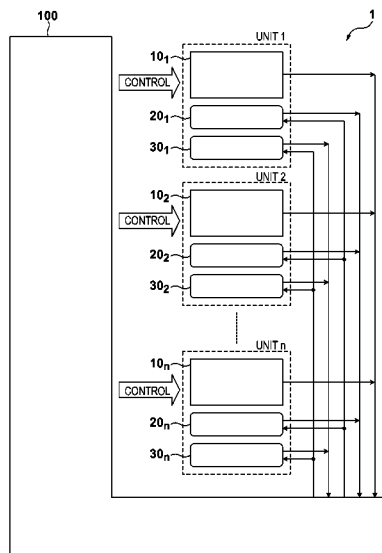


FIG. 1

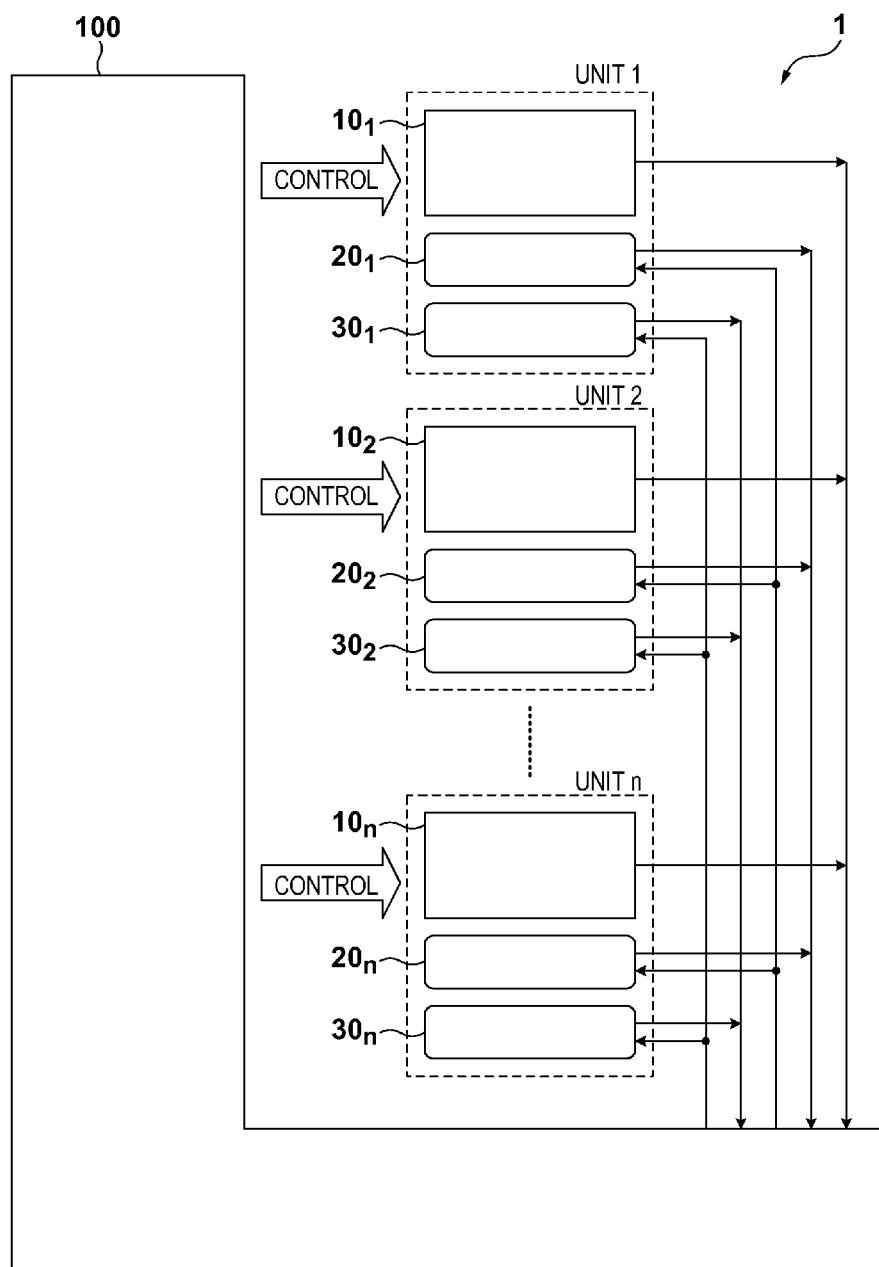


FIG. 2A

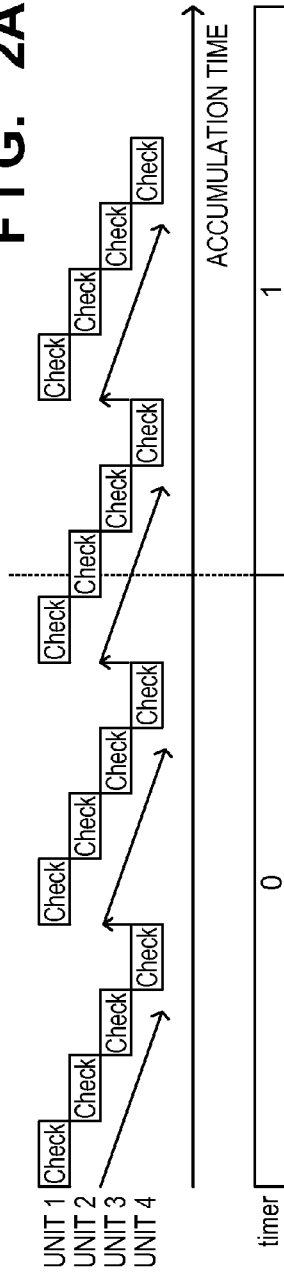


FIG. 2B

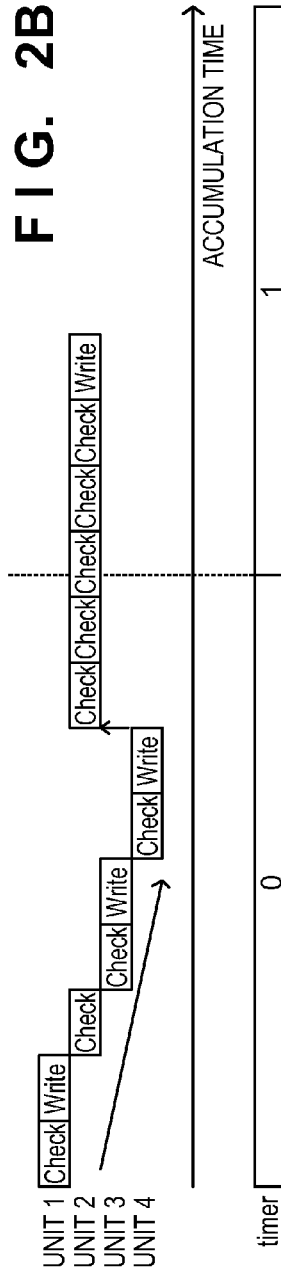


FIG. 2C

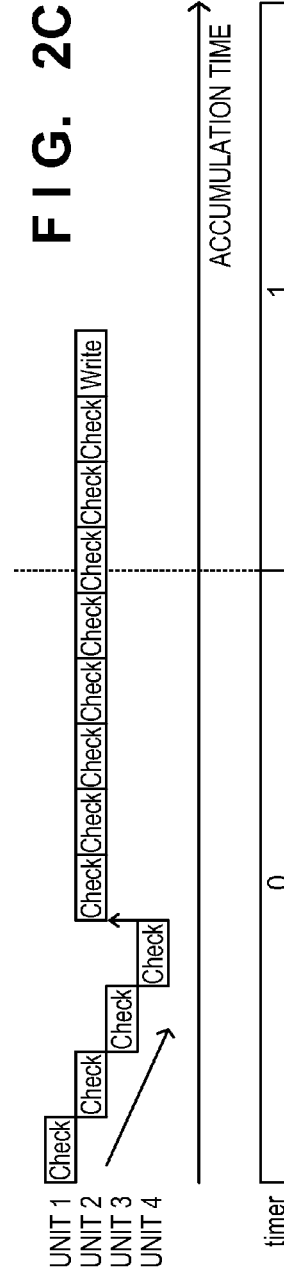
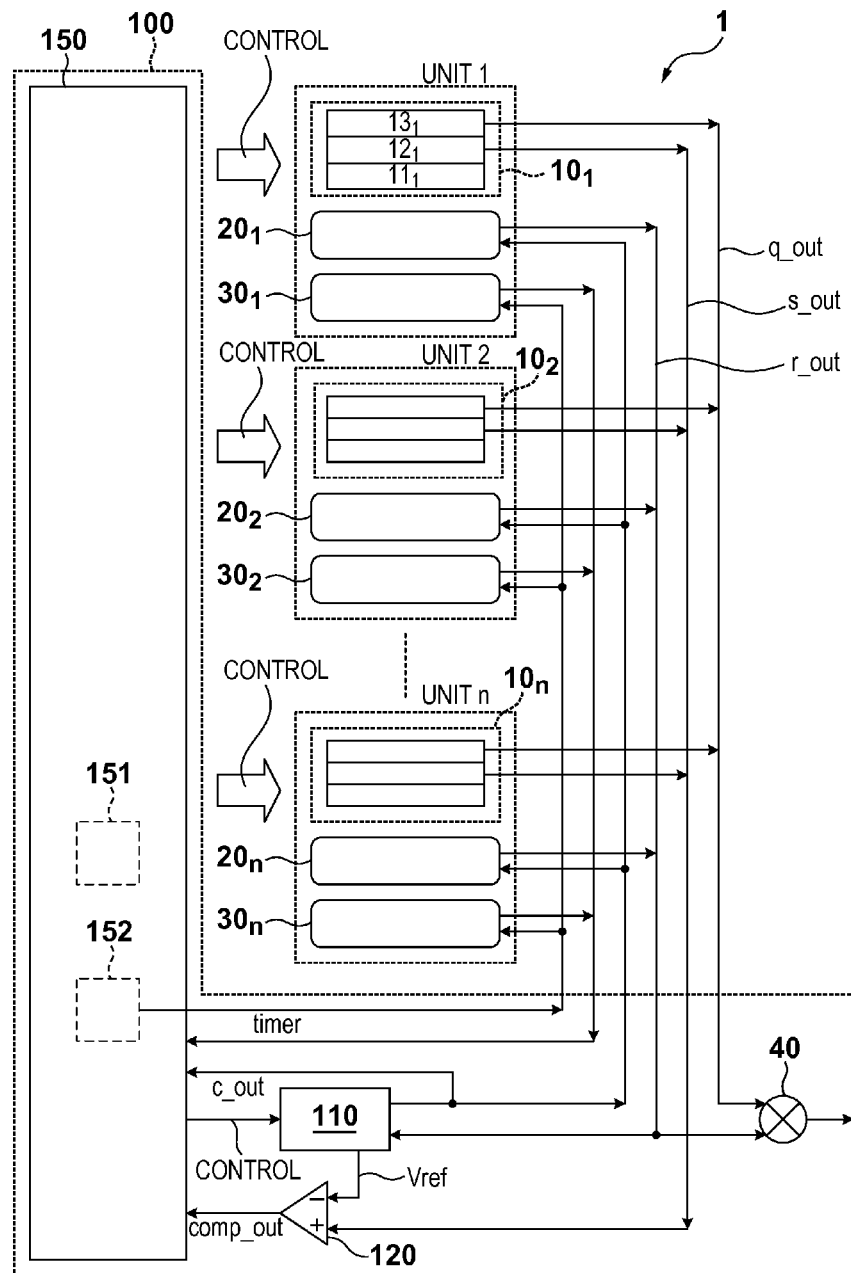
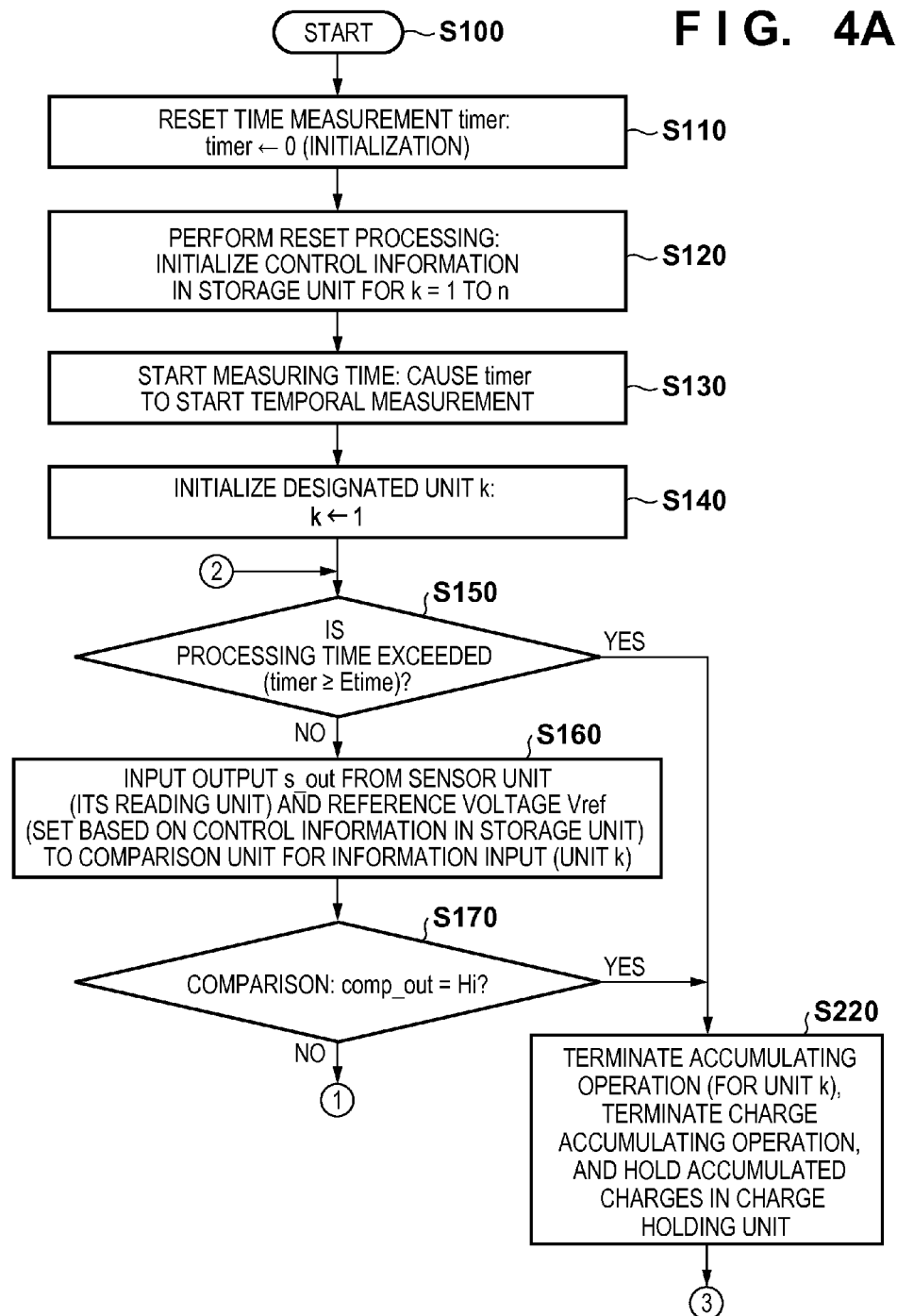


FIG. 3





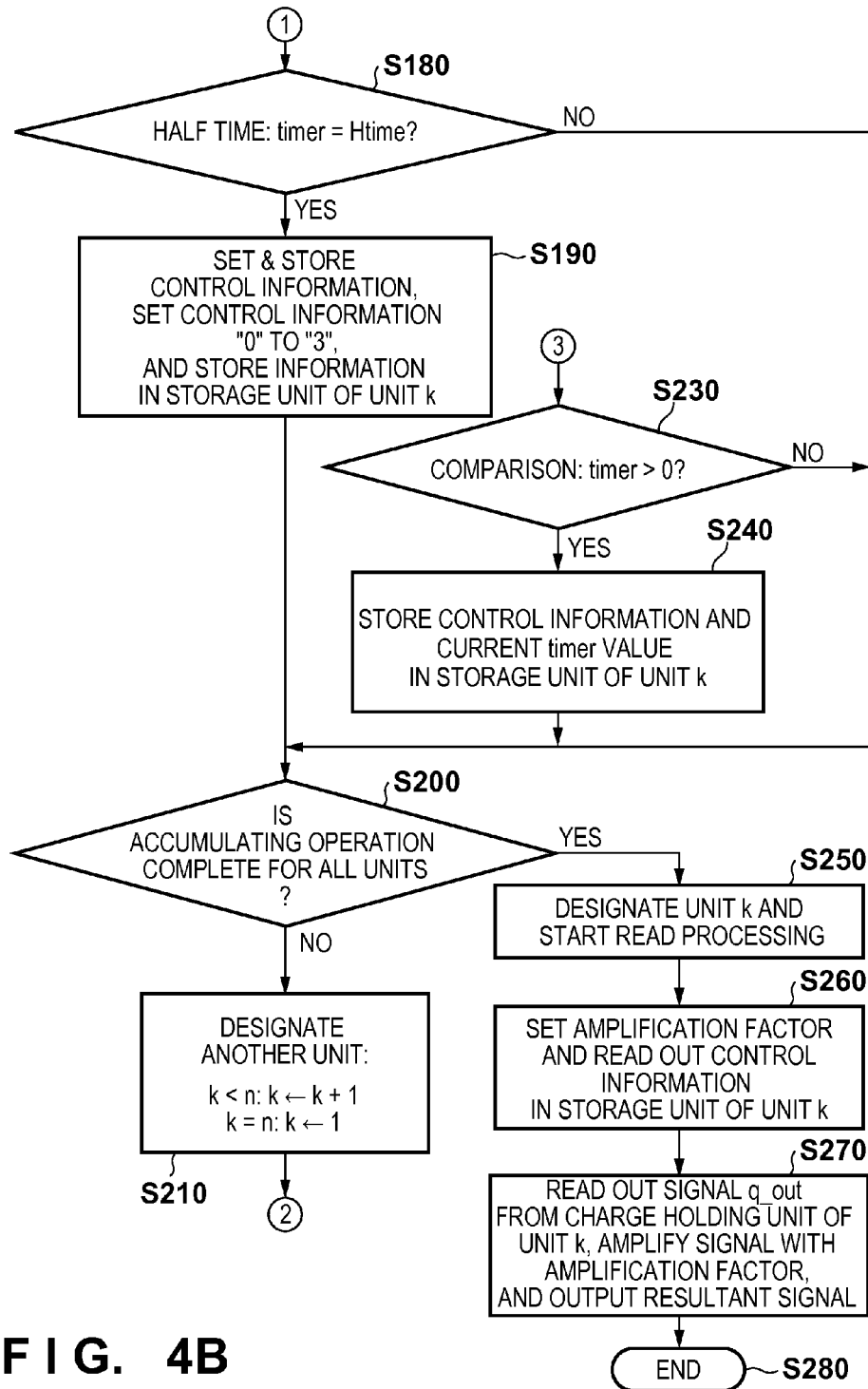


FIG. 4B

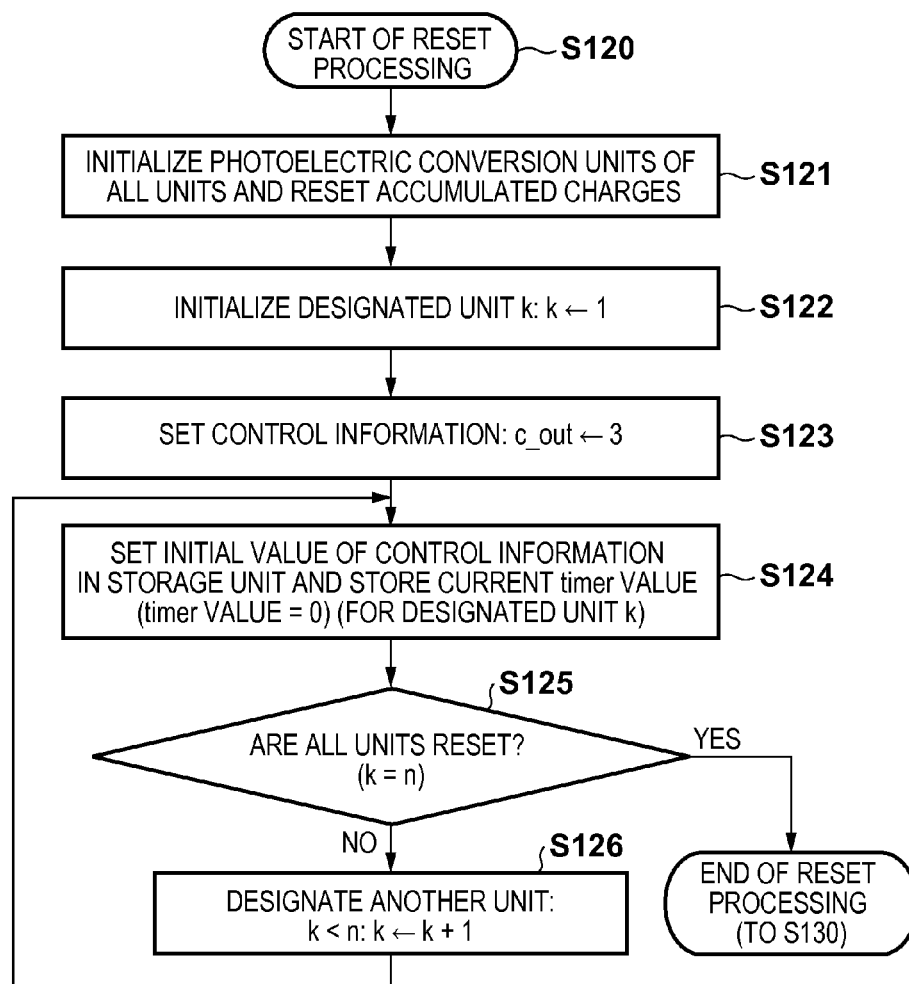
FIG. 5A

FIG. 5B

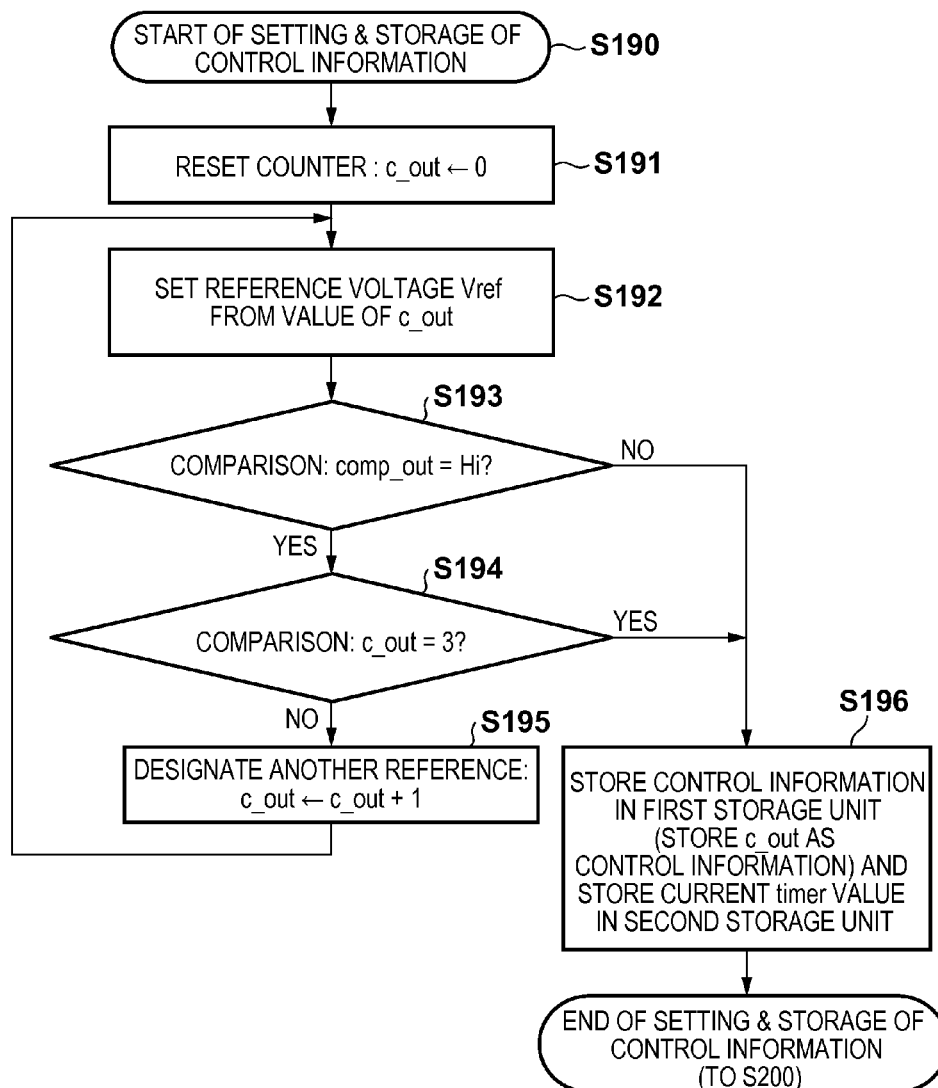


FIG. 6

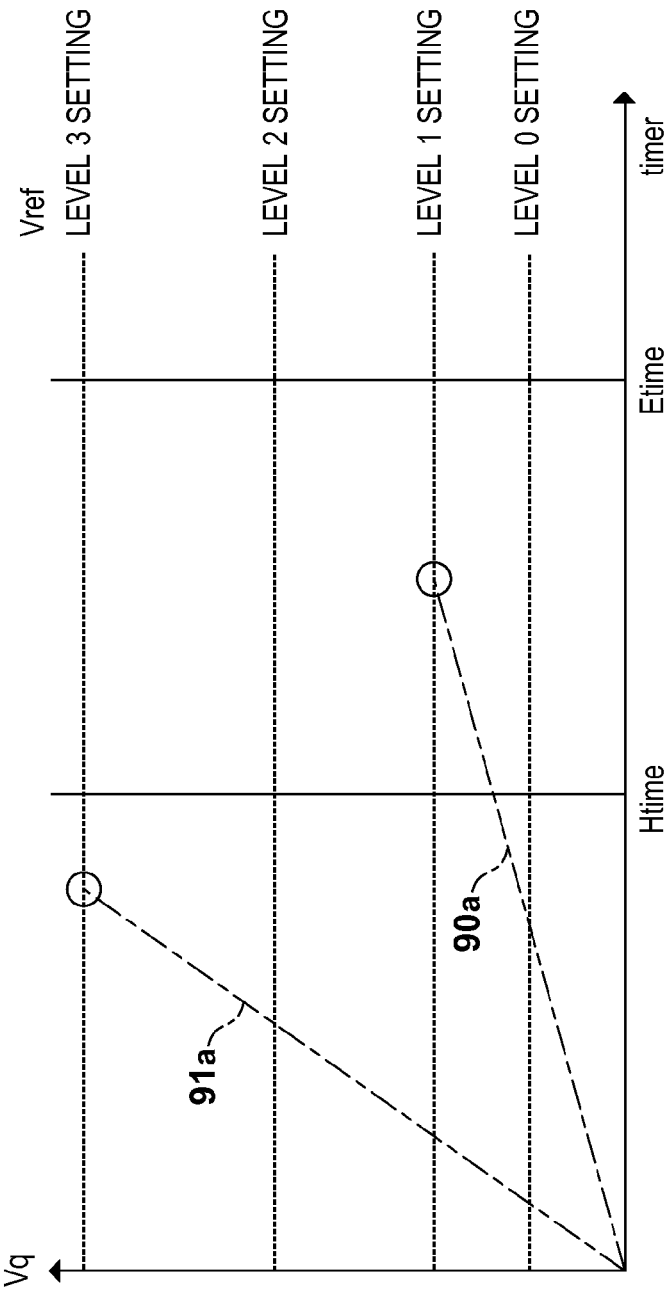


FIG. 7A

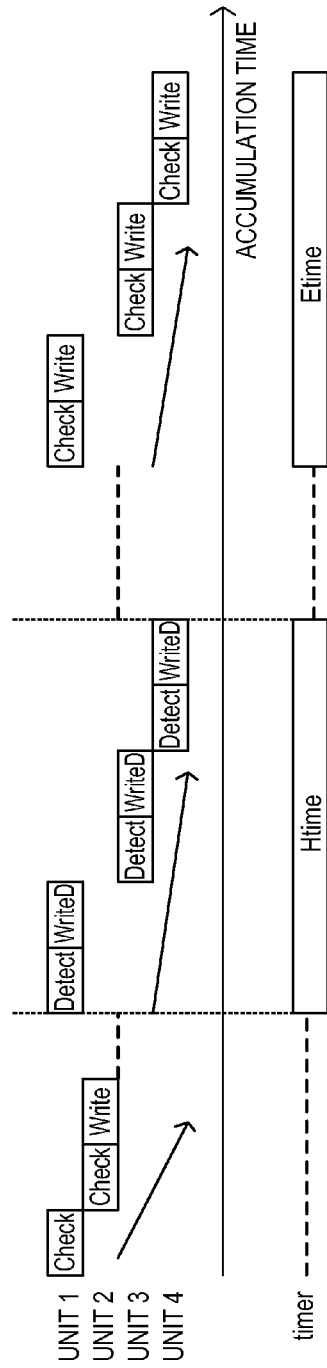


FIG. 7B

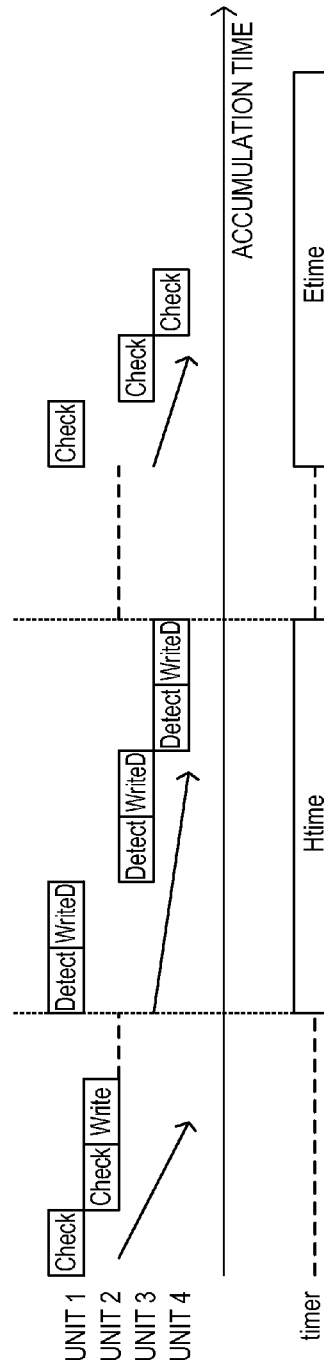


FIG. 8

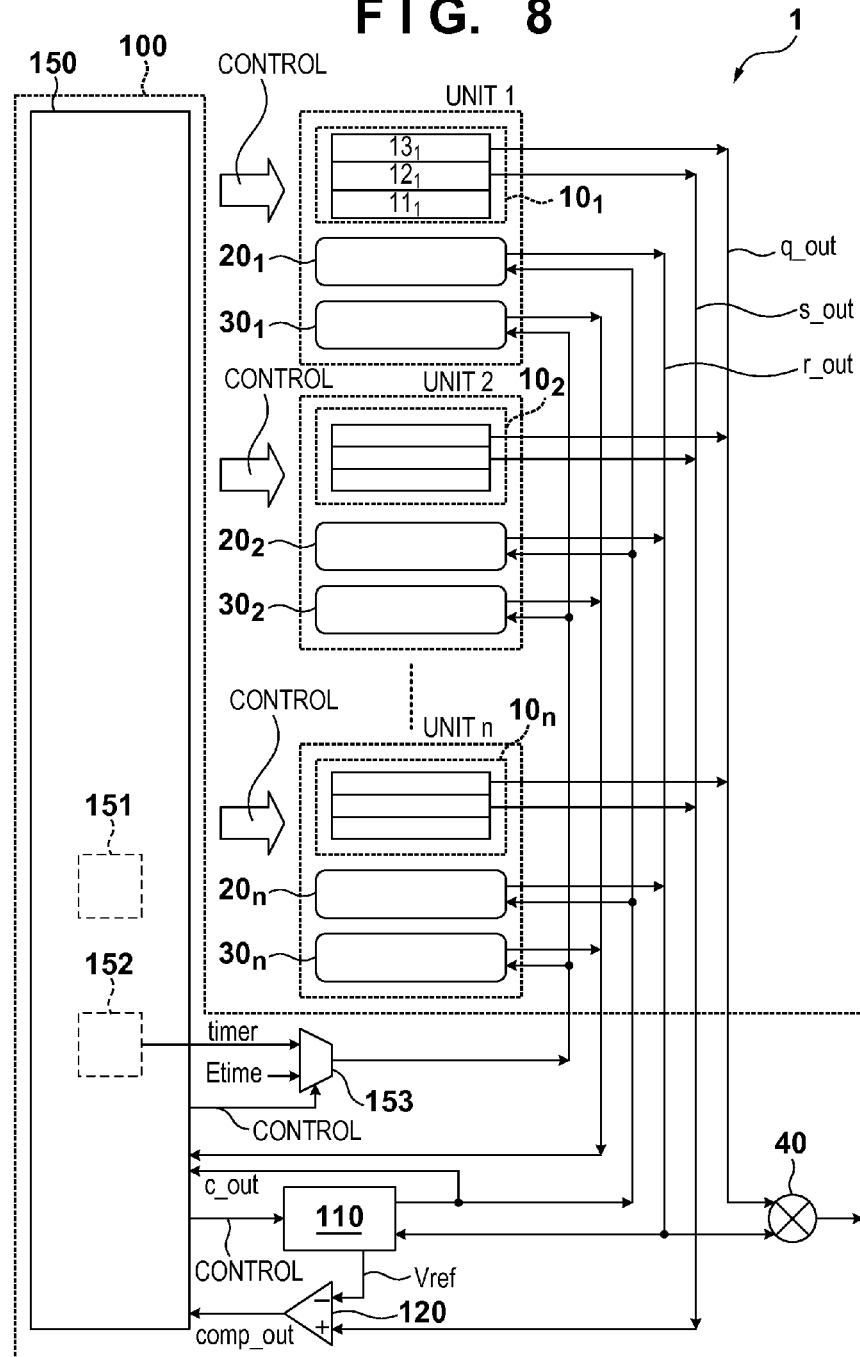
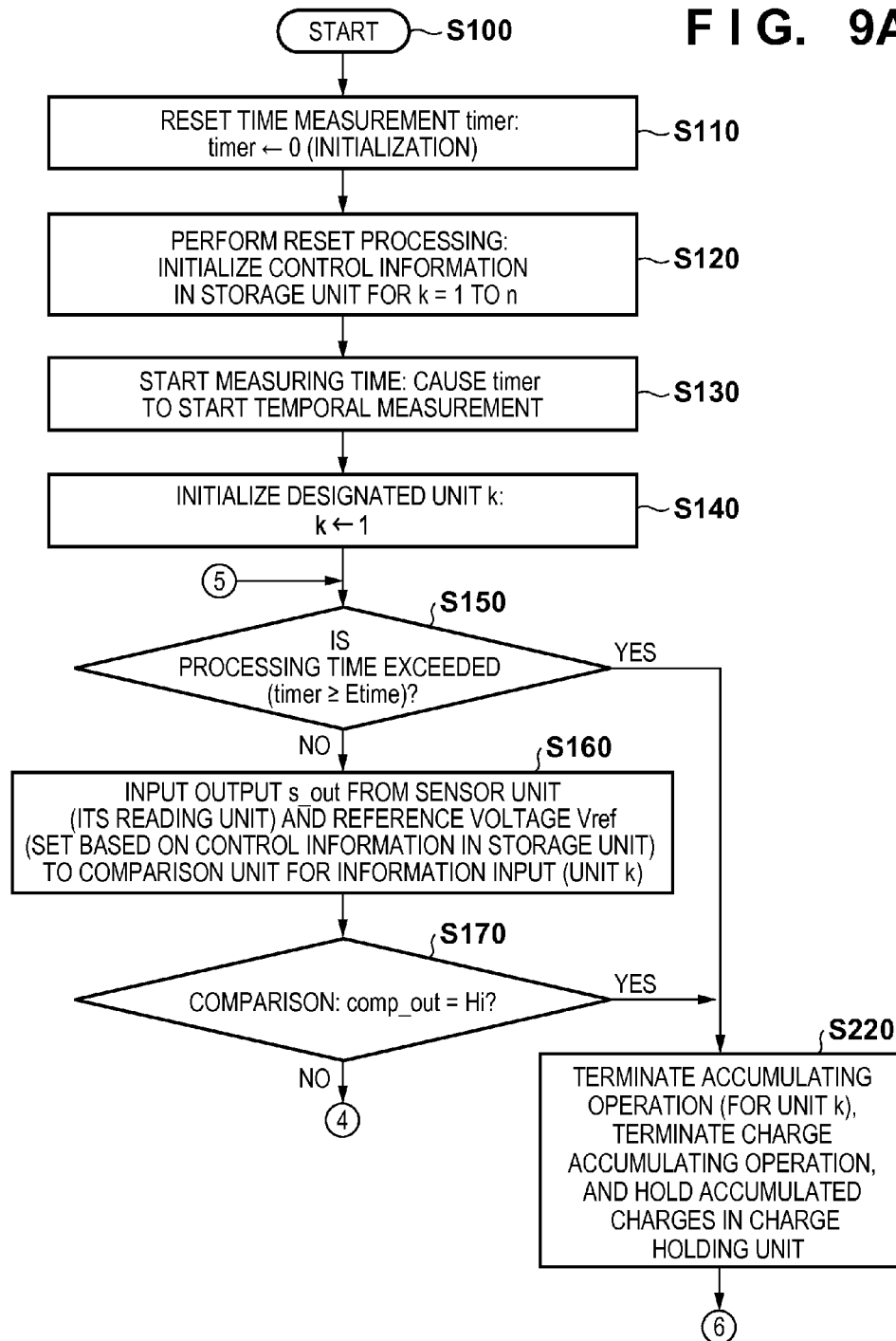


FIG. 9A



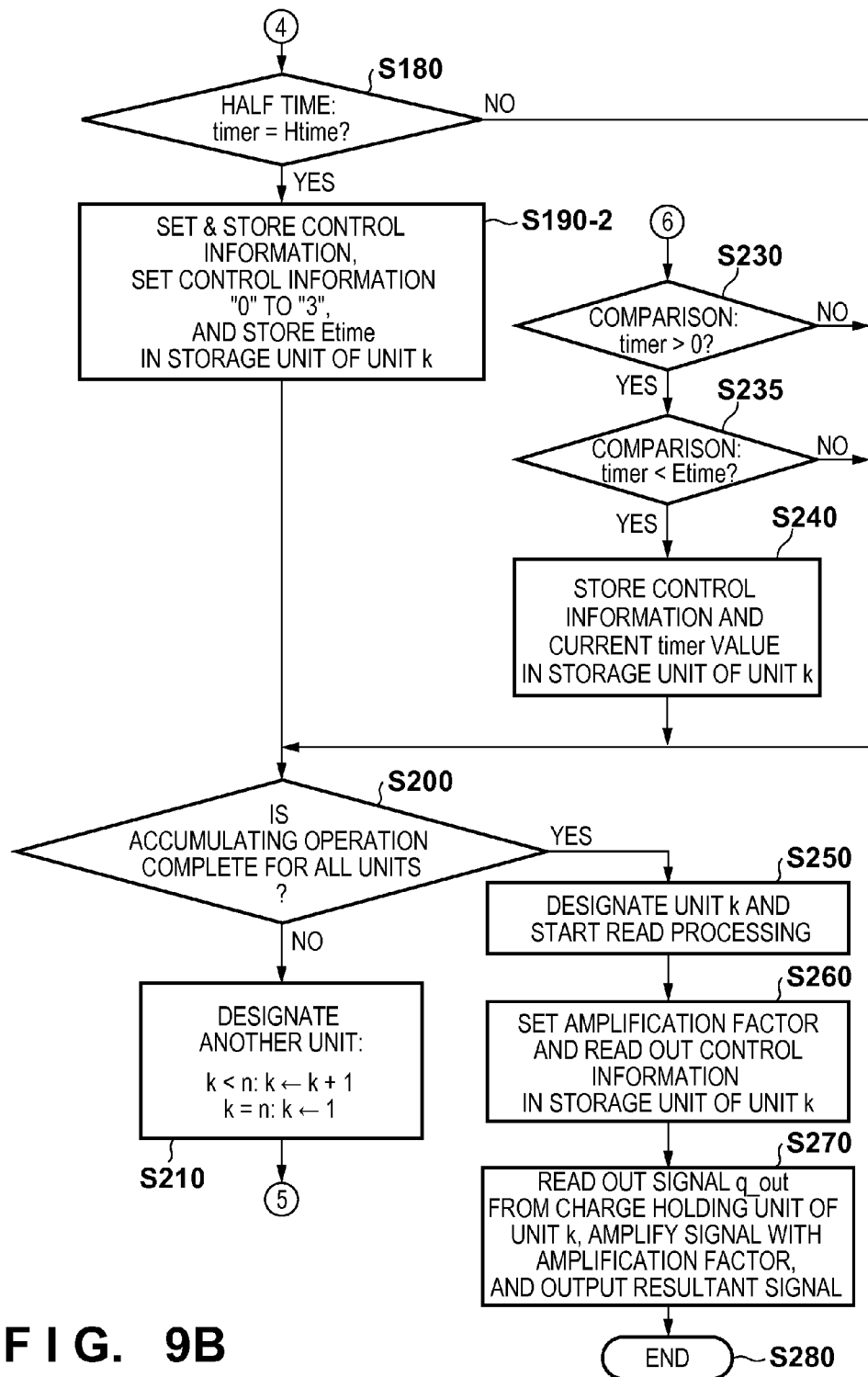


FIG. 9B

FIG. 10

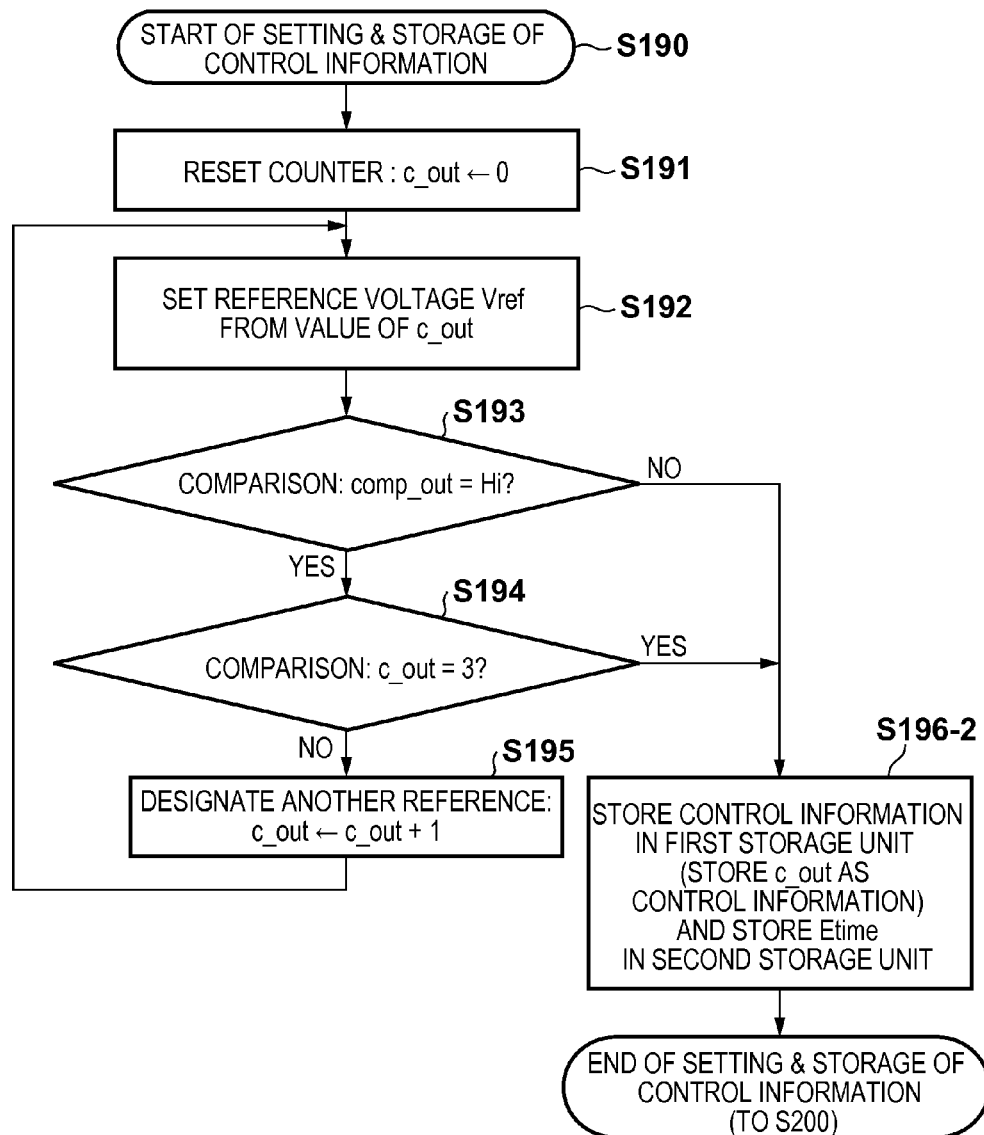
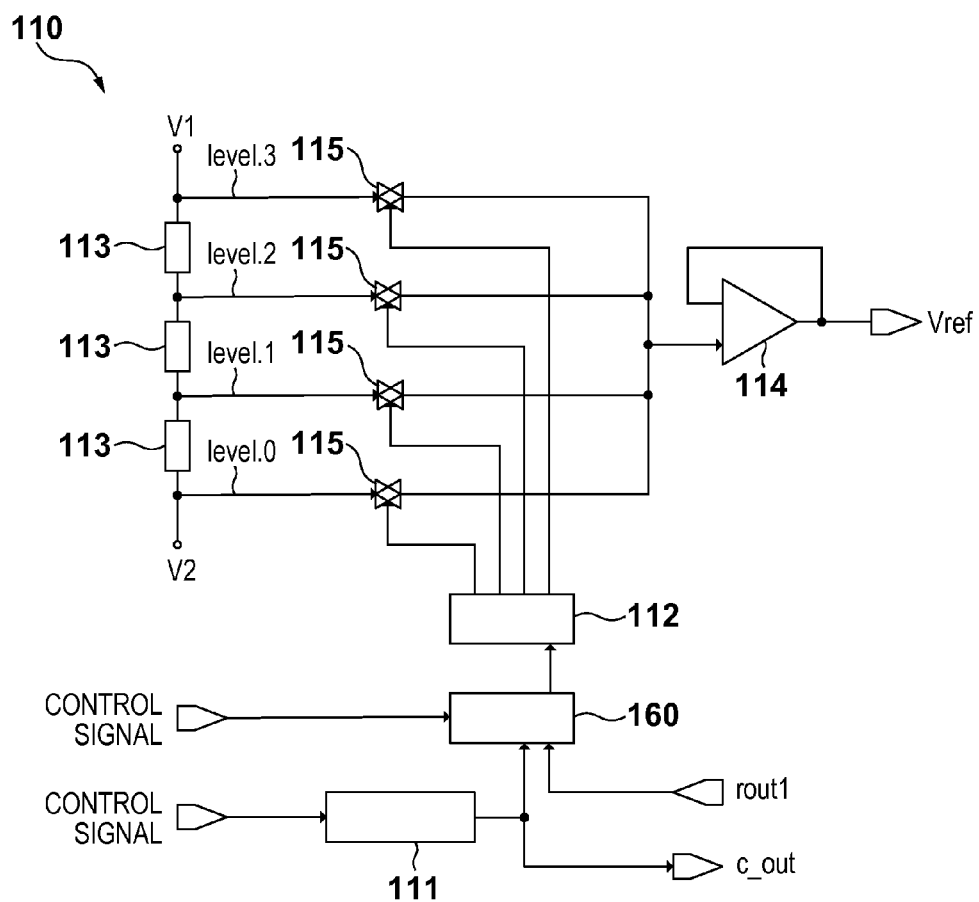


FIG. 11



SEMICONDUCTOR DEVICE, METHOD OF CONTROLLING THE SAME, AND CAMERA BASED ON REFERENCE COMPARISON

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a semiconductor device, a method of controlling the same, and a camera.

2. Description of the Related Art

Japanese Patent Laid-Open No. 11-150686 discloses a photoelectric conversion apparatus including photoelectric conversion means including photoelectric conversion elements and storage means, and a control means for controlling the photoelectric conversion means. The control means controls the charge accumulating operation of the photoelectric conversion elements based on control information stored in the storage means. The control means generates control information based on the monitoring result of the charge accumulation state of each photoelectric conversion element at a predetermined timing, and stores the information in the storage means. A photoelectric conversion means is provided for each distance detection point for the detection of the focus of a camera. The above control makes it possible to perform appropriate focus detection in accordance with the luminance of an object.

Repeating the operation of monitoring photoelectric conversion elements and the operation of storing control information in storage units based on the monitoring results will lead to delays in the timing of starting monitoring the photoelectric conversion elements of the respective photoelectric conversion means. This will lead to insufficient frequency of monitoring the respective photoelectric conversion elements, and hence can cause a deterioration in monitoring accuracy.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention has been made by the inventor upon recognition of the above problem, and provides a technique advantageous for improving the monitoring accuracy of the storage states of the photoelectric conversion elements of a plurality of photoelectric conversion means when sequentially controlling the respective photoelectric conversion means.

One of the aspects of the present invention provides a semiconductor device comprising a plurality of units, each including a sensor unit which accumulates charges upon photoelectric conversion and a storage unit which stores information, and a control unit which controls each of the plurality of units, wherein the control unit sequentially performs, for each of the plurality of units, first operation of comparing a reference voltage with an output signal from the sensor unit based on the amount of accumulated charges and second operation of storing information based on the comparison result in the storage unit corresponding to the sensor unit if an output signal from the sensor unit reaches the reference voltage in the first operation, and the control unit is configured to be able to start the first operation for a next unit upon skipping the second operation and skips the second operation in a predetermined period.

Further features of the present invention will become apparent from the following description of exemplary embodiments with reference to the attached drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a block diagram for explaining an example of the arrangement of a semiconductor device;

FIGS. 2A to 2C are views for explaining an example of the content of the operation of a semiconductor device according to the first embodiment;

FIG. 3 is a block diagram for explaining a concrete example of the arrangement of a semiconductor device according to the first embodiment;

FIGS. 4A and 4B are flowcharts for explaining an example of the operation of the semiconductor device according to the first embodiment;

FIGS. 5A and 5B are flowcharts each for explaining part of the operation of the semiconductor device according to the first embodiment;

FIG. 6 is a graph for explaining the operation of the semiconductor device according to the first embodiment;

FIGS. 7A and 7B are views each for explaining an example of the content of the operation of a semiconductor device according to the second embodiment;

FIG. 8 is a block diagram for explaining a concrete example of the arrangement of the semiconductor device according to the second embodiment;

FIGS. 9A and 9B are flowcharts for explaining an example of the operation of the semiconductor device according to the second embodiment;

FIG. 10 is a flowchart for explaining part of the example of the operation of the semiconductor device according to the second embodiment; and

FIG. 11 is a circuit diagram for explaining an example of the arrangement of a reference setting unit 110.

DESCRIPTION OF THE EMBODIMENTS

First Embodiment

FIG. 1 shows the schematic arrangement of a semiconductor device 1 according to the first embodiment. Referring to FIG. 1, the semiconductor device 1 includes a plurality of units k ($k=1$ to n) and a control unit 100 which controls them. Each unit k can be provided in correspondence with a distance detection point. The unit k includes a sensor unit 10_k , a first storage unit 20_k , and a second storage unit 30_k . Referring to FIG. 1, the sensor unit 10_k , the first storage unit 20_k , and the second storage unit 30_k are arranged adjacent to each other. However, the sensor unit 10_k , the first storage unit 20_k , and the second storage unit 30_k may be arranged in accordance with a chip layout. For example, the sensor unit 10_k , the first storage unit 20_k , and the second storage unit 30_k may be formed by using different semiconductor chips as long as the control unit 100 manages them so as to form the unit k . The sensor unit 10_k can include a photoelectric conversion unit including a light-receiving element such as a photodiode, a reading unit which reads out output signals from the photoelectric conversion unit, and a charge holding unit which holds charges from the photoelectric conversion unit. The semiconductor device 1 can be applied to a focus detection apparatus such as a camera. The focus detection apparatus controls the accumulation time of charges generated by photoelectric conversion in the sensor unit in accordance with the luminance level of an object when performing focus detection processing.

The control unit 100 decides control information concerning a reference value (to be referred to as an accumulation end level) for the determination of the accumulation end of the sensor unit 10_k and stores the control information in the first storage unit 20_k . The control unit 100 then accumulates charges in the sensor unit 10_k up to the accumulation end level based on the control information stored in the first storage unit 20_k . In this case, the control unit 100 stores the time (accumulation time) required from the start to the end of accumu-

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lation as information concerning the luminance of the object in the second storage unit 30_k . It is possible to set an accumulation time by measuring an elapsed time (a measured value will be referred to as a timer value) using a timer. This arrangement can appropriately control, for example, the charge accumulating operation of the sensor unit 10_k in accordance with an output from the sensor unit 10_k which has detected external input information (the amount of light received in this case).

First of all, the control unit **100** decides control information for controlling accumulating operation in accordance with the luminance level of an object. In the step of detecting the focus established afterward, the control unit **100** causes the sensor unit 10_k to accumulate charges up to the accumulation end level based on the control information stored in the first storage unit 20_k , and stores the accumulation time in the second storage unit 30_k . With regard to a unit which has not reached the accumulation end level even after the lapse of a predetermined period, the control unit **100** changes the accumulation end level by rewriting the corresponding control information to shorten the charge accumulation time. A calculation unit (e.g., a defocus amount detection unit (not shown)) which performs calculation processing can perform predetermined calculation processing for the output signal based on the amount of charges accumulated in this manner. This calculation result is then fed back to a focusing unit (e.g., a lens driving unit (not shown)) which performs focusing operation. This makes it possible to focus the lens.

An example of the above operation for each focus detection point in a case in which the luminance of an object is high will be described with reference to FIGS. 2A to 6. FIG. 2A to 2C show the content of the operation of the semiconductor device **1**. FIG. 2A shows the content of the operation of each unit (how each unit performs processing with the lapse of time). The abscissa represents the time, and the ordinate represents the content of the processing by the unit k . In this case, for the sake of easy understanding, assume that the number of units is four ($n=4$, $k=1$ to 4). After starting accumulating operation, the device performs predetermined processing for units **1** to **4** in the order named. Upon completion of processing for unit **4**, the process returns to processing for unit **1**.

"Check" processing corresponds to the first operation and monitors the unit k . More specifically, the device determines whether an output signal from the sensor unit 10_k of the unit k , which corresponds to the amount of accumulated charges, has reached the accumulation end level based on the control information stored in the first storage unit 20_k . If the output signal has reached the accumulation end level, the device terminates the accumulating operation of the unit k . The timer value plotted on the abscissa represents the time elapsed from the start of accumulating operation. The second storage unit 30_k stores this value when the unit k completes accumulation. Although the timer value increases with the lapse of time, each unit performs "Check" processing a plurality of times during the period of a certain timer value. That is, each unit performs "Check" processing in a sufficiently short period of time relative to the measurement of a timer value.

FIGS. 2B and 2C show the content of operation in a case in which the luminance of the object corresponding to units **1**, **3**, and **4** is high, units **1**, **3**, and **4** each have reached the accumulation end level within a period corresponding to timer value=0, and unit **2** has reached the accumulation end level within a period corresponding to timer value=1.

FIG. 2B shows operation in a comparative example, in which an output from the sensor unit in each of units **1**, **3**, and **4** has reached the accumulation end level in the first "Check" processing, and the device performs "Write" processing

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immediately after the "Check" processing. "Write" processing corresponds to the second operation, in which the second storage unit 30_k stores the timer value at the time of the "Check" processing performed immediately before the second operation. In this case, with the "Write" processing, second storage units 30_1 , 30_3 , and 30_4 each store the timer value "0". Thereafter, the device performs "Check" processing in the same manner for unit **2** for which "Write" processing has not been performed, thereby storing the timer value "1" at the time of determining the end of accumulation in the second storage unit 30_2 .

In this case, according to this scheme, performing "Write" processing will make (delay) the time of performing "Check" processing for units **2** to **4** come after that in the case shown in FIG. 2A. That is, the start timing of sequentially monitoring the respective units delays. For example, this may cause the problem that when the luminance of an object is high, "Check" processing cannot follow an increase in the amount of accumulated charges, and hence an output signal from the sensor unit which should be obtained is saturated. As a result, a portion with a high light intensity is lost as calculation information for a defocus amount. This may cause a deterioration in focus detection accuracy.

FIG. 2C shows a case in which units **1**, **3**, and **4** have reached the accumulation end level in the first "Check" processing, as described above. In this case, the device does not perform "Write" processing for any unit k until the lapse of a predetermined period. That is, this scheme skips "Write" processing until the lapse of timer value=0, and does not cause the above delay with respect to the time of performing "Check" processing for each unit k . This can therefore improve the focus detection accuracy. In "Check" processing for unit **2**, although an output from the sensor unit of unit **2** has not reached the accumulation end level, the device will perform "Write" processing afterward when the output reaches the accumulation end level.

FIG. 3 is a block diagram for explaining a concrete example of the arrangement of the semiconductor device **1**. The sensor unit 10_k can include, for example, a photoelectric conversion unit 11_k which outputs a signal in accordance with the amount of charges accumulated by accumulating operation, a reading unit 12_k which reads out an output signal from the photoelectric conversion unit 11_k , and a charge holding unit 13_k which holds the charges accumulated in the photoelectric conversion unit 11_k . The control unit **100** can include, for example, a controller **150**, an amplification unit **40**, a reference setting unit **110**, and a comparison unit **120**. The amplification unit **40** amplifies the signal output from the sensor unit 10_k and outputs the resultant signal. The reference setting unit **110** outputs, to the comparison unit **120**, a reference voltage V_{ref} (potential is V_{ref0} to V_{ref3}) for comparison with the output signal from the reading unit 12_k . The comparison unit **120** compares the reference voltage V_{ref} with an output signal from the reading unit 12_k . The controller **150** issues an operation instruction to each block in accordance with a signal from each block.

The first storage unit 20_k and second storage unit 30_k of the unit k may be formed with, for example, the same addresses in one SRAM. More specifically, with single address control, the controller **150** can simultaneously store information in the first storage unit 20_k and the second storage unit 30_k , or simultaneously read out information from them by selecting an address corresponding to the unit k . More specifically, assume that an SRAM corresponding to n addresses is prepared, and 16 bits are assigned to one address. In this case, for example, it is possible to assign 2 bits to the first storage unit 20_k , and 14 bits to the second storage unit 30_k .

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In the unit k , the photoelectric conversion unit 11_k is constituted by, for example, a pair of sensor arrays (or sensor areas) each having a plurality of pixels, and can include about 30 to 80 pixels. One and the other of a pair of sensor arrays output two data based on an image of an object. The semiconductor device **1** can perform focus detection by a phase-difference detection scheme by using the two data. Upon detecting the amount of charges accumulated in the photoelectric conversion unit 11_k , the reading unit 12_k outputs a peak signal of outputs from a plurality of pixels of the photoelectric conversion unit 11_k . In this case, the reading unit 12_k may detect a bottom signal together with the peak signal and use a peak/bottom signal obtained from the difference between them. This output result can be output as a signal s_out to the comparison unit **120** in accordance with an instruction from the controller **150**. The charge holding unit 13_k temporarily holds the charges accumulated in the photoelectric conversion unit 11_k as a pixel signal q_out . The pixel signal q_out is output to the amplification unit **40** in accordance with an instruction from the controller **150**.

The first storage unit 20_k stores control information concerning the accumulation of charges in the photoelectric conversion unit 11_k in accordance with an instruction from the controller **150**. Upon completion of accumulating operation, the device stores the determination result in the first storage unit 20_k . This control information may be 2-bit information ("0" to "3") as in this embodiment. The control information is output to the reference setting unit **110** and the amplification unit **40** in accordance with an instruction from the controller **150**.

As exemplified by FIG. **11**, the reference setting unit **110** includes a counter **111**, a selector **160**, a decoder **112**, a plurality of resistive elements **113**, an amplifier **114**, and a plurality of switches **115**. The counter **111** is used when the comparison unit **120** compares the reference voltage V_{ref} from the amplifier **114** with an output signal from the reading unit 12_k . The selector **160** can select either a measurement result c_out from the counter **111** or control information $rou1$ from the first storage unit 20_k . The decoder **112** generates a control signal for selecting the potential of the reference voltage V_{ref} based on an output from the selector **160**. The amplifier **114** outputs the reference voltage V_{ref} generated by these control signals and the resistive elements **113**.

The reference setting unit **110** uses the control information $rou1$ stored in the plurality of first storage units 20_k to select the potential of the reference voltage V_{ref} by using the switches **115** based on the decoding result obtained by the decoder **112**. The reference setting unit **110** outputs the reference voltage V_{ref} to the comparison unit **120** to certify the output level of an output signal from the reading unit 12_k . The reference setting unit **110** outputs the measurement result c_out obtained by the counter **111**. The measurement result c_out is stored in the first storage unit 20_k selected in accordance with an instruction from the controller **150**. The comparison unit **120** compares the reference voltage V_{ref} with the signal s_out read out from the reading unit 12_k , and outputs a comparison result $comp_out$ to the controller **150**. In this embodiment, if $s_out \geq V_{ref}$, then $comp_out = Hi$.

The amplification unit **40** amplifies and outputs the output signal q_out from the charge holding unit 13_k in accordance with the amplification factor set by the first storage unit 20_k . The controller **150** communicates with these functional blocks and issues operation instructions in accordance with an execution program. A program memory **151** included in the controller **150** shown in FIG. **3** may store the execution program.

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Each operation of the semiconductor device **1** will be described next with reference to the flowchart of FIGS. **4A** and **4B**. First of all, the device starts this execution program in step **S100** (in the following description, each step will be simply indicated by a symbol alone). In **S110**, the device initializes a value timer (timer=0) in a timer **152** (included in, for example, the controller **150**). In **S120**, the device performs reset processing in accordance with the flowchart shown in FIG. **5A** (**S120** to **S126**). First of all, the device resets the charges accumulated in the photoelectric conversion unit 11_k in accordance with an instruction from the controller **150** (**S121**). Thereafter, the device starts accumulating charges. In **S122**, the device initializes each unit to be selected and control information stored in the storage unit 20_k (for example, "3" (**S123**)), and stores the control information in the storage units 20_k of all the units. In addition, the second storage unit 30_k stores the initialized value (timer=0) of the timer **152** (**S124**, **S125**, **S126**). Control information "3" as this initial value may be stored from the output c_out from the counter **111** (FIG. **11**) in accordance with an instruction from the controller **150** as in this embodiment.

In **S130**, the timer **152** starts measuring an elapsed time (adding timer values at predetermined time intervals). In **S140**, the device initializes the value ($k=1$) in a register (not shown) which designates the unit k . In **S150**, the controller **150** refers to the timer value to determine whether it exceeds an upper limit value $Etime$ (corresponding to the second time) of preset charge accumulation times. If $timer \geq Etime$, the process advances to **S220**. If $timer < Etime$, the process advances to **S160**. In **S160**, the comparison unit **120** receives the output s_out from the reading unit 12_k and the reference voltage V_{ref} based on the control information stored in the first storage unit 20_k in the unit k in accordance with an instruction from the controller **150**. In **S170**, the comparison unit **120** compares s_out set in **S160** with V_{ref} . At this time, if $output\ comp_out = Hi$ ($s_out \geq V_{ref}$) from the comparison unit **120**, the process advances **S220** (to be described later). If $comp_out = Low$ ($s_out < V_{ref}$), the process advances to **S180**. In **S180**, the controller **150** refers to a timer value to determine whether it is equal to a preset half determination time (half time $Htime$ equal to the first time). $Htime$ may be a time which comes after timer=0 and suitable for checking a charge accumulation state, and may be, for example, a half time before the end time $Etime$ at which accumulating operation is forcibly terminated. If $timer = Htime$, the process advances **S190**. If $timer \neq Htime$, the process advances to **S200** (to be described later). In **S190**, the controller **150** sets again control information in the photoelectric conversion unit 11_k of the unit k based on the amount of accumulated charges up to this time point to shorten the accumulation time, and stores the information in the first storage unit 20_k . This control information allows the device to determine how much charges have been accumulated in the photoelectric conversion unit 11_k , based on the reference voltage V_{ref} output from the reference setting unit **110** in accordance with an instruction from the controller **150** and the result obtained by the comparison unit **120**.

Operation in **S190** is implemented by a program based on the flowchart shown in FIG. **5B**. This operation will be described together with the plot indicating the concrete operation shown in FIG. **6**. FIG. **6** is a plot, with the abscissa representing timer, and the ordinate representing an output potential V_q corresponding to the amount of charges accumulated in the photoelectric conversion unit 11_k . Referring to FIG. **6**, a dashed line **90a** indicates a case in which the object is dark, and a dashed line **91a** indicates a case in which the object is sufficiently bright.

In the case indicated by the dashed line 90a, when timer=Htime, the device performs operation in S190. In S191, the device resets the output c_out from the counter 111 (c_out=0) in accordance with an instruction from the controller 150. In S192, the device sets the reference voltage Vref in accordance with the value of c_out. The device sets the reference voltage Vref at this time by causing the selector 160 to select c_out in accordance with an instruction from the controller 150. If, for example, c_out=2, the device sets the reference voltage Vref to "level 2". In S193, the comparison unit 120 compares Vq with Vref. If output comp_out=Low (Vq<Vref) from the comparison unit 120, the process advances to S196. If comp_out=Hi (Vq≥Vref), the process advances to S194. In S194, the controller 150 determines whether the reference voltage Vref is set to "level 3" (c_out=3). If the reference voltage Vref is "level 3" (c_out=3), the process advances to S196. If the reference voltage Vref is not "level 3" (c_out≠3), the process advances to S195. In S195, the device sets the reference voltage Vref to one level up (add +1 to the value of c_out) in accordance with an instruction from the controller 150. The process then returns to S192. The device repeats the same procedure until Vq≥Vref in S193 and the process advances to S196, or until the reference voltage Vref is set to "level 3" (c_out=3) in S194 and the process advances to S196. In S196, the device sets control information in accordance with the reference voltage Vref set in S193 or S194. That is, the first storage unit 20_k stores the value of c_out at this time as control information in accordance with an instruction from the controller 150. In the case indicated by dashed line 90a, therefore, the first storage unit 20_k stores c_out=1 as control information in S190 to S196 described above. Although the second storage unit 30_k simultaneously stores the time at this time point, that is, the time (Htime) of intermediate determination, the store unit stores the accumulation end time again at the accumulation end time.

In the case indicated by the dashed line 91a, since Vq reaches the reference voltage Vref at "level 3" when timer<Htime and the process advances to S220 after S170, the device does not perform the operation in S190. This is because, since the arbitrary storage unit 20_k stores the initialized control information "3" by the reset processing (S120) shown in FIG. 4A, the reference voltage Vref is set to the potential "level 3" in accordance with the control information "3" in S160.

In S200 in FIG. 4B, the controller 150 determines whether the processing in S220 has been done for all the units k. If the processing in S220 has been done for all the units k, the process advances to S250 (to be described later). If this processing has not been done, the process advances to S210. In S210, the device designates the next unit k. The process then returns to the operation in S150. More specifically, if k<n, the device designates the next unit k (adds +1 to the value of k). If k=n, the device resets k=1 and designates the next time (for example, adds +1 to the timer value).

In S220, the controller 150 terminates charge accumulating operation in the photoelectric conversion unit 11_k of the unit k, and at the same time, temporarily holds the accumulated charges as the pixel signal q_out in the charge holding unit 13_k. In S230, if timer>0 upon referring to the timer value at the end of accumulating operation in S220, the device stores the timer value in the second storage unit 30_k in S240. The process then advances to S200. If timer=0 in S230, the device skips S240, and the process advances to S200. In S210 described above, a unit which has already completed accu-

mulating operation is sometimes designated as the new unit k. In this case, the device does not perform the processing in S220 to S240.

S250 corresponds to operation performed by the controller 150 after the execution of S220 for all the units k. In this operation, the device reads out the pixel signal q_out from the arbitrary charge holding unit 13_k. In S260, the device reads out control information stored in the first storage unit 20_k and sets an amplification factor. At this time, it is possible to set control information again (not shown) in S190 shown in FIG. 5B to check the validity of the control information set in S190 prior to execution of S260. In S270, the device amplifies the pixel signal q_out read out in S250 with the amplification factor set in S260 and outputs the amplified signal. In S280, it is possible to terminate a series of operations and implement the function.

As described above, the semiconductor device 1 skips the step of storing information concerning the accumulation time in the second storage unit 30_k at the end of accumulating operation if the value of the timer 152 is equal to the reset value "0". The semiconductor device 1 executes the operation shown in FIG. 2C and improves the focus detection accuracy.

Second Embodiment

The second embodiment will exemplify the operation of a semiconductor device 1' in a case in which the luminance of an object is low will be described with reference to FIGS. 7A to 10. As exemplified by FIG. 1, the semiconductor device 1' has the same arrangement as that of the first embodiment. Like FIGS. 2A to 2C, FIGS. 7A and 7B show the content of the operation of the semiconductor device 1'. "Check" processing and "Write" processing in FIGS. 7A and 7B are the same as those in FIGS. 2A to 2C. "Detect" processing and "Write" processing will be described below.

"Detect" processing is the processing of changing a reference voltage Vref to a value corresponding to the luminance of an object with respect to the unit k to be monitored, when the timer value reaches Htime. More specifically, for example, in a case in which the luminance of an object is low, if a signal corresponding to the amount of accumulated charges does not reach a reference voltage Vref (does not complete accumulating operation) even when the timer value reaches Htime, the new reference voltage Vref is set for the corresponding unit k. The reference voltage Vref to be set can be set to, for example, a potential Vref2 (Vref2<Vref3). In this manner, the semiconductor device 1' shortens the time required for charge accumulation afterward, and performs appropriate processing in accordance with the luminance. Assume that Vref2 is a value smaller than the initial value of Vref3. "WriteD" processing is the processing of storing information concerning a set (selected) reference voltage in a first storage unit 20_k. At the same time with this processing, a second storage unit 30_k stores the timer value at this time point.

The operation exemplified by FIGS. 7A and 7B will be described below. In this case, unit 2 has terminated accumulating operation before the timer value reaches Htime. For units 1, 3, and 4, the luminance of an object is low, and "Detect" processing has been performed when the timer value reaches Htime, while the new reference voltage Vref has been set. In this case, in these sensor units, no charge has been accumulated until the new reference voltage Vref is set, while the timer value has reached Etime to forcibly terminate the accumulating operation.

FIG. 7A shows the operation of a reference example, in which when the timer value reaches Etime, the device per-

forms "Write" processing for units **1**, **3**, and **4**, and stores the timer value (Etime) at this time point in a second storage unit **30_k**. That is, this operation delays the timing of sequentially monitoring the respective units, and also delays the operation end time of the reference example when the luminance of the object is low. In contrast, FIG. 7B shows the operation of this embodiment, in which the device has not performed "Write" processing for units **1**, **3**, and **4** when the timer value reaches Etime, and has terminated the accumulating operation earlier than in the reference example.

FIG. 8 shows an example of the arrangement of the semiconductor device **1'**. Note that a redundant description of portion described with reference to FIG. 3 will be omitted. This embodiment differs from the first embodiment in that the second storage unit **30_k** stores the timer value of a timer **152**, and the device switches a selector **153** at the timing controlled by a controller **150** to allow to store Etime. This operation can be executed in accordance with the flowchart shown in FIGS. 9A and 9B. The processing from **S100** to the step in which the timer value reaches Htime is the same as that in the flowchart shown in FIG. 4A.

If the timer value becomes equal to Htime in **S180**, the process advances **S190-2**. The operation in **S190-2** can be performed by a program based on the flowchart shown in FIG. 10. The operation in **S190-2** differs from the operation exemplified by FIG. 5B. That is, it is possible to store Etime in the second storage unit **30_k** in **S196-2**, instead of the value (Htime) of the timer **152** at this time point, by switching the selector **153** under the control of the controller **150**.

When the timer value reaches Etime without termination of accumulating operation in any unit **k**, the process advances to **S220** upon determination in **S150**, thereby forcibly terminating the accumulating operation. Since timer value > 0 in **S230**, the process advances to **S235**. In **S235**, the device compares the timer value with Etime. In this case, since timer < Etime does not hold, the process advances to **S200** upon skipping **S240**. If the device determines in **S200** that there is any unit **k** which has not completed accumulating operation, the process returns to **S150** through **S210** to perform similar processing for the next unit **k**. As described above, when the timer value reaches Etime, the device causes all the units **k** which have not completed accumulating operation to terminate the accumulating operation upon skipping the storage processing for the storage units in **S240**. Thereafter, the process advances to **S250** through **S200** to perform the subsequent processing.

As described above, when the timer value reaches Htime, the semiconductor device **1'** stores Etime in the second storage unit **30_k**. When the timer value reaches Etime afterward, the device stores the timer value at this time point as information concerning the accumulation time in the second storage unit **30_k** in each unit **k** which has completed accumulating operation. On the other hand, the device skips the processing of storing information concerning the accumulation time in the second storage unit **30_k** in each unit **k** which has not completed accumulating operation. In this manner, the semiconductor device **1'** can execute the operation shown in FIG. 7B. Although the above description concerns the operation to be performed when the luminance of an object is low, this embodiment can be applied in combination with the first embodiment.

Although the two embodiments have been described above, the present invention is not limited to them. Obviously, the objects, states, applications, functions, and other specifications of the present invention can be changed as needed, and other embodiments can implement the present invention. The sensor unit, for example, is formed as a CMOS image sensor, and may be implemented as any other types of sen-

sors. In cooperation with or instead of the controller, an OS or the like operating on a computer may perform all or part of the operation control of each functional block described above.

The focus detection apparatus included in a camera has been described as a typical application example of the semiconductor device according to the embodiments described above. The concept of camera includes not only a device whose principal operation is to image but also a device (for example, a personal computer or portable terminal) additionally provided with an imaging function. The camera can include the above focus detection apparatus, a solid-state image sensor, and a processor which processes a signal output from the solid-state image sensor. The processor can include, for example, an A/D converter, and a processor which processes digital data output from the A/D converter. The processor may execute focus detection processing, and a calculation unit which executes the focus detection processing may be included in the focus detection apparatus. Changes can be made, as needed.

While the present invention has been described with reference to exemplary embodiments, it is to be understood that the invention is not limited to the disclosed exemplary embodiments. The scope of the following claims is to be accorded the broadest interpretation so as to encompass all such modifications and equivalent structures and functions.

This application claims the benefit of Japanese Patent Application No. 2012-163071, filed Jul. 23, 2012, which is hereby incorporated by reference herein in its entirety.

What is claimed is:

1. A semiconductor device comprising a plurality of units, each including a sensor unit which accumulates charges upon photoelectric conversion and a storage unit which stores information, and a control unit which controls each of the plurality of units,

wherein the control unit is configured to perform, for a selected unit of the plurality of units, a first operation of comparing a reference value with an output signal from the sensor unit, the output signal being based on the amount of accumulated charges, and a second operation of changing the information in the storage unit if the comparison result indicates that an output signal from the sensor unit reaches the reference value in the first operation,

in a first period, the control unit performs the first operation for at least one of the plurality of units but does not perform the second operation for the at least one of the plurality of units even if the comparison result obtained by the first operation indicates that an output signal from the sensor unit reaches the reference value, and

in a second period different from the first period, the control unit performs, for a selected unit of the plurality of units, the first operation, and the second operation if the comparison result obtained by the first operation indicates that an output signal from the sensor unit reaches the reference value.

2. The device according to claim 1, wherein the first period starts from a timing at which the accumulation starts.

3. The device according to claim 1, wherein the control unit does not perform, in the second period, the first operation and the second operation for a unit of the plurality of units, after the control unit determines that an output signal of that unit has reached the reference value in the first operation.

4. The device according to claim 1, wherein the control unit does not perform, in the first period, the first operation for a unit of the plurality of units, after the control unit determines that an output signal of that unit has reached the reference value.

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5. The device according to claim 1, wherein the control unit presets the information stored in the storage unit upon start of the first period.

6. The device according to claim 1, wherein the information is configured to indicate an elapsed time from when the accumulation starts to when an output signal from the sensor unit reaches the reference value.

7. The device according to claim 1, further comprising a calculation unit,

wherein each of the sensor units forms a pair of sensor arrays in which a plurality of photoelectric conversion units are arrayed, and

the calculation unit performs phase-difference detection based on an output signal from one of the pair of sensor arrays and an output signal from the other of the pair of sensor arrays.

8. The device according to claim 1, further comprising a timer configured to measure an elapsed time to generate time information, wherein each of the plurality of units further includes a second storage unit configured to store the time information generated by the timer as information associated with an accumulation time required for accumulating charges in the sensor, and

wherein the control unit initializes the time information of the timer and the time information in the second storage unit of the plurality of units to an initial value upon start of the first period, and

wherein the first period is a period during which the timer outputs the initial value.

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9. The device according to claim 1, wherein the first period is followed by the second period.

10. A camera comprising:

a semiconductor device defined in claim 1;

a solid-state image sensor; and

a processor which processes a signal output from the solid-state image sensor.

11. A method of controlling a semiconductor device including a plurality of units, each including a sensor unit which accumulates charges upon photoelectric conversion and a storage unit which stores information, the method comprising:

performing, in a first period, for at least one of the plurality of units, a first operation of comparing a reference value with an output signal from the sensor unit, the output signal being based on the amount of accumulated charges; and

performing, in a second period different from the first period, for a selected unit of the plurality of units, the first operation, and a second operation of the comparison result obtained in the first operation indicates that an output signal from the sensor unit reaches the reference value,

wherein in the first period, the second operation is not performed even if the comparison result obtained in the first operation indicates that an output signal from the sensor unit reaches the reference value.

12. The method according to claim 11, wherein the first period starts from a timing at which the accumulation starts.

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